

Guest Column: Maryland's congressional gerrymander is historically bad

By PHIL ANDREWS For The Capital | Posted: Friday, October 19, 2012 11:30 am

A recent editorial, "State districts are measurably bad" (The Capital, Oct. 8), criticized Maryland's congressional gerrymander, citing the finding by Azavea, an information firm, that the Free State's congressional districts are the least compact of any in the nation.

In addition to being measurably bad, Maryland's new congressional districts are historically bad — far more contorted than the 1812 Massachusetts State Senate map for which the word gerrymander was coined.

The atrocious 3rd Congressional District looks like blood spatter from a crime scene, including bits and pieces of Baltimore City and Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard and Montgomery counties. Just a glance at this map is enough to convince most people to vote against Question 5.

This convoluted district, represented by Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Baltimore County, is ranked the third least compact in the country and includes Annapolis, Towson and parts of Silver Spring, while excluding most of the communities between. Proponents of the gerrymander are careful not to show the District 3 map to the public, which you can find on the Maryland Department of Planning website.

The editorial states that voters will not get logical congressional districts and better representation in Congress until state law assigns the drawing of district lines to an independent, nonpartisan panel, and goes on to state, that's what should be on the ballot. However, while the Maryland Constitution thankfully provides for the right to petition a recently enacted law to referendum, it doesn't provide Maryland voters the right to petition their own proposed law (the right of initiative) to the ballot.

This makes achieving fundamental political reform much harder in Maryland than some other states, because entrenched incumbents must be persuaded to approve reforms that reduce their own power. A voter revolt against this gerrymander could help persuade state lawmakers that supporting real redistricting reform is in their self-interest.

It's clear Gov. Martin O'Malley and a majority of the General Assembly thought their gross gerrymander of the state's congressional districts would meet little resistance. Instead, many newspapers in the state have blasted it, as has Common Cause of Maryland, civil rights groups, lawmakers of both parties, respected political commentators across the political spectrum, and former U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens.

Notably, the Montgomery County Democratic Party and the Prince George's Democratic Party have refused to endorse it, despite strong pressure from the governor and Democratic Party kingmakers. In addition, seven of the nine members of the all-Democratic Montgomery County Council also strongly oppose this gerrymander, as does State Comptroller Peter Franchot, a Democrat.

If this gerrymander is repealed on Nov. 6, the governor and General Assembly would be required to redraw the congressional districts for the 2014-2020 elections. If they ignore the will of the voters and make only cosmetic changes, voters can elect more responsive representatives the following year. The best outcome would be real reform of the redistricting process, including establishment of an independent redistricting commission to draw congressional boundaries. Two hundred years of gerrymandering in the United States provides overwhelming evidence that politicians can't be trusted to draw political districts. The outcome of the 2012 congressional races would not be affected by repeal of the congressional map.

The governor and state Democratic Party leaders have arrogantly split communities and used voters as pawns for partisan and intra-party advantage. It's no wonder so many people are disgusted with politics.

Fortunately, Marylanders refused to accept what Annapolis powerbrokers foisted upon them, and petitioned the gerrymander to the ballot. Now, voters have a once-in-a-decade opportunity to advance real redistricting reform by using the power of this referendum. It is the best, and perhaps only, way to get the attention of the governor and the General Assembly about the imperative for fair and rational redistricting in order to promote political competition — a matter of fundamental importance to the healthy functioning of our democracy.

By repealing this outlandish gerrymander by voting against Question 5, voters can send a resounding message to the governor and their state representatives that they are fed up with politics as usual and want real reform.